

Letters to the Editor

A Gridiron Wife Speaks

SIR: As an independent female journalist and wife of a Gridiron Club member, I may be in the position to comment on the drive led by some of my zealous female journalists to be invited to join the Gridiron Club. Their technique is the picket line, the petition and pressure on public figures not to attend the Club's annual dinner this April 8. They maintain through their co-ed Journalists for Professional Equality that no club "representing itself as an organization of the most distinguished journalists in Washington" should exclude women members.

If this were true, I might be on the picket line with them on the night of the dinner rather than at some rather stodgy Gridiron wives "do."

But is it true? Can they tell me when the club has ever presented itself in such words or manner?

I can find no reference to professional distinction — or even competence — in its constitution and amendments. Nor have I ever heard a member so represent himself. If a mystique of "the most distinguished" has grown up, isn't it only human for its beneficiaries not to dispel it?

But my concern — as it should be with my female colleagues — is with hard facts. To wit: "Article I section 2. The object of the Club is to promote good fellowship." Further, "Article IV section 2. Active members shall be men regularly employed in Washington as correspondents, writers, editors or cartoonists of daily newspapers . . . The number of active members shall not exceed fifty."

Consistent in Following Constitution

This means that CBS' Washington-based Eric Sevareid, ABC's Howard K. Smith, Life's Hugh Sidey, Newsweek's Sam Shaeffer are ineligible because they don't work for daily newspapers; just as the Star's Mary McGrory, the Post's Elsie Carper, UPI's Helen Thomas, The New York Times' Marjorie Hunter are ineligible because they are not men. Clearly, the Gridiron Club is consistent in following its constitution, 19th Century as it may be.

It is not obliged, therefore, to accept the "most distinguished male journalists" in town, as my female colleagues contend. In many cases Gridiron "memberships" are passed down to the favored next-in-line in Washington newspaper offices and bureaus. Usually, no more than two members — sometimes three — to a newspaper. And everyone knows that our local newspapers have more than two or three "most distinguished" male journalists. Talent for song writing and singing also help to get a man in.

A newspaperman cannot be approved for the Club's waiting list if two members oppose him in writing. When this happens, the reasons are probably personal rather than professional. I stress once again it is definitely a social club of 50 Washington newspapermen who are well aware that many male journalists of as great — indeed, often greater — distinction are outside of the Club — several of them Pulitzer Prize winners. But since professional excellence is not the club's main criterion, so what?

Modified, "Clockwork Orange", mind-changing techniques can work on some politicians and public figures, led to believe that attendance at the dinner abets professional discrimination on sex grounds.

Suddenly Wrong

Senator Edmund Muskie, guest at several Gridiron dinners, suddenly realized the other day how wrong he had been in the past. "The policy of excluding women," he wrote, "appears to me to be inconsistent with the role of a professional organization dedicated to excellence and high quality in journalism."

Why not find more subtle ways to demolish what anthropologist Lionel Tiger calls "male-bonding" drives? He explains that it is the male's desire to enjoy together simply what the Gridiron old fashionedly calls "good fellowship."

But men's rights, they will find, are as dear to men as are women's to women; so avoid the big grab.

So, consider, my sisters, the democratic, parliamentary way as practiced on the "Hill" so many of you cover.

(1) Persuade club members to vote a constitutional change of the word "men" to "persons."

(2) Do it tactfully. Don't forget we will not be invited just for any professional distinction, but to share "good fellowship."

(3) Be a skilled office politician, so we can jump ahead of our offices' next-in-line for the Gridiron list!

Once we're in, we will find that all Gridironers actually do is work hard and have fun together creating satirical, musical, costumed skits to be presented at an excellent white-tie dinner with an abbreviated repeat the next day for wives and friends. The Gridiron show scorches, but rarely burns, many of the VIPs in the audience.

Of course, we may want to change all that nonsense to something more lofty, more professional, and to cut out the dinner altogether.

Or we may decide to confine ourselves, instead of 50, to perhaps 500, 1,500, 2,000 of Washington's "most distinguished" male and female, all-media journalists, regardless of their "good fellowship" qualities. We can meet once a year in the National Guard Armory — with a spillover in the Kennedy stadium — for a little dinner with a couple of thousand of the country's male and female leading lights. We could furnish binoculars to diners out of normal vision range or scatter about closed-circuit TV sets.

It would be a Gridiron dinner, all right. A bit different, say, from the dinners in 1885 or 1972.

But I ask you, could we say, in all honesty, "viva la difference"?

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